

OWN HIM

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Christmas Eve comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20. It is on page 724 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas!

"Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). Into this world of darkness and sin and death, a light has dawned, a child is born, a Savior has come.

You know that this world is filled with darkness. Sometimes we try to ignore it. We try to mask the darkness. We try to forget the darkness. But we can't. There's always something that reminds us of the darkness and sin and death. And one of the things at Christmas that actually reminds us of the darkness is the familiarity of it all. We have traditions here. You might even have traditions in your homes. These traditions serve to keep the right things constant. I'd be interested to know how many times some of you have come to this same building, at this same time, every year on December 24th. And you've sat in the same pew. You've sang the same hymns. I know because I tried to change them one year and it didn't go well. You've heard the exact same Scripture readings. You've basically even heard the same sermon every year. Even as preachers have changed, the sermon has pretty much stayed the same. There's a comfort and a familiarity to all this, but there is also pain, because not everything is the same as last year or the year before. Things have changed in our lives, and not always for the better. Most especially, there are people who were here last year or the year before who are not here this year, and it's not because they went to see the other side of the family. Now there are also people here this year who were not here last year, and we rejoice in this. These new people are a treasure to us, but they don't replace the people who aren't here anymore. They are still gone, and the familiarity of all this reminds us of that tragedy. As one of my favorite Advent hymns puts it, "[We] mourn o'er joys departed" ("O How Shall I Receive Thee").

But we do not mourn as those who have no hope, for into this darkness, a light has dawned, a child has been born, a Savior has come.

We recall the first proclamation of Christmas. It was the first Christmas sermon, preached by an angel to shepherds. "The angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' " (2:10-11).

Every year there seems to be something in the Christmas narrative that is new to me. Maybe it's some detail that I hadn't noticed before. Or maybe it's something I had noticed, but it strikes me in a fresh way. And those of you who spend time in the Scriptures, you know what this is like. Whenever you start to think you know it all, you find something new. Or maybe it's more like the new thing finds you, because you're not looking for it, but there it is. And this year with the Christmas story it's this: how odd it is for angels—or for anyone, really—to proclaim the birth of a child to complete strangers, and not merely to state that a child is born, but that he is born *to you*.

Typically a child is born to its mother and father. This year Alicia and I had the great joy of having a child born to us. It has also been a great joy to show him off to people. We like sharing him, but he's not yours; you can't have him. I remember, a couple days after he was born, announcing here that a child had been born to us. Now imagine how strange it would have been if, instead of saying that *we* had a child, I had said, "A child is born to *you*." That would be strange. Or what if I ran down to the store, snuck into that secret room with the microphone, and announced to everyone in the store, "A child is born to you." That would be strange. Social services would probably keep an eye on me. Free range parenting to the extreme. Our son is not yours. He is ours. We have the joy and responsibility of owning him.

So I find it remarkably strange that the angel would proclaim ownership of this child to random shepherds in a field. And the proclamation was not just for the shepherds, but for the entire world. The angel says, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all* the people."

This is how you know the Christ child was born for you. Do you fit into the category of “all people”? If you do, and I know you do, then this child is born unto you. The angel, of course, knew these words would be remembered, written down, read at every Christmas Eve service, and even proclaimed by Linus when Charlie Brown forgot what Christmas is all about. The words “unto you” were intended for the entire world. With most children, these words are intended for mom and dad. But with Jesus, these words are for the whole world.

So maybe you found it strange in the hymn we just sang, the line, “Come, peasant, king, to own Him” (“What Child Is This?”). I always found that line to be kind of curious. In this relationship between God and man, we probably think of God as being in the owner’s seat. After all, he is both the Creator and Redeemer of humanity, so he has a double right to us. But the angel proclaims that this child is born unto you. So the hymn, though it sounds wrong, is profoundly correct, that we are invited to come and own Jesus. He belongs to you. For this purpose he was born: to be owned by you. So this thing of being redeemed by Jesus Christ is one of those human relationships, kind of like marriage, where the ownership runs both directions. He owns us, and we own him. This is what we learn from the angel’s sermon.

And I wonder what Mary would have thought of this. *Angel, did you just tell those shepherds that my kid belongs to them? Yes, and not just them, but the entire world.*

So we think of Mary in all this. We think of the blessing she had of carrying, bearing, and nurturing this child. She considered it a profound blessing that God would look upon her humble estate and grant her the blessing of mothering this child. Of all the women in the world, she had this unique blessing. But she also had a profound pain, because this child did not belong to her the same way a normal child belongs to its mother. She had to share this child with the world, and this sharing of her child would take the most painful form.

Mary learned about this quite early. If she didn’t already know it from the Old Testament prophecies about the suffering of the Christ (e.g., Is. 52:13-53:12), she heard about it when Jesus was yet an infant. When he was forty days old they took Jesus to the temple, and there was a man there by the name of Simeon. And when Simeon saw Jesus he prophesied over him and said to Mary, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also” (2:35). Simeon was speaking of that fatal Friday afternoon when Mary would have to share her son with the world by standing at a distance and watching him die the worst kind of death the people of that age could dream of. Nothing can pierce the soul of a parent like having to watch her child die. And this was no ordinary death. This was a public and humiliating death. It was the most shameful kind of death known to man—to be condemned as a criminal, stripped, beaten, and hung on a cross. It was, by design of the Romans, painful and humiliating. And Mary had to watch it. This was the way God appointed for her to share her child with the world. This is how shepherds, kings, you, and I own him. He becomes ours by redeeming us. In this redemption, we become his, and he becomes ours.

This was the purpose for which he was sent into the world. It was always—even from before the foundation of the world—it was always God’s intention for this to happen. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unanimously agreed upon this redemption plan. So as we consider the birth of this child, we remember also his death and resurrection, because that is the whole point of the birth.

And we see this in the way Luke writes his gospel. The way Luke structures the book and ties it together is remarkable. Sometimes you hear me talk about the “golden nuggets” in

OWN HIM (Luke 2:1-20)

Scripture. They're these little details that if we read too quickly we might miss them, but when we slow down, we start to see them, and we find them to be most valuable. My favorite golden nugget in the Christmas story—and perhaps in the entire Bible—is one I learned a few years ago while reading a big, technical theology book (*Just, Luke 1:1-9:50, 110*). Big, technical theology books can actually be quite useful, because I could have read over this a hundred times and still missed it. It's this link that Luke puts into his book that ties the beginning and end together. And it reveals the purpose of it all. He speaks of what two different people did to care for Jesus when he was at his weakest. At his birth, Luke says this concerning Mary: "She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). She cared for Jesus, because at this stage in his life, he really couldn't take care of himself. And then near the end of the book, Luke speaks of another individual who really does the same thing for Jesus when he descends back into a completely helpless state.

There is a Joseph in this story too, but this Joseph was not from Nazareth. This Joseph was from Arimathea, and he had his part to play in caring for the King of heaven and earth. "This [Joseph] went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus" (23:52). And notice the parallelism to what Mary did for Jesus: "Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid" (23:53).

Luke writes his gospel this way so that when we get to the end, we remember the first time Jesus was carried by someone else, wrapped in cloths, and laid to rest in a new and different place, so that we remember: this was God's plan all along; so that we remember: Jesus was born for a reason, he was born to die, he was born to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21); so that we remember: just as the manger held him for a time, so the grave must also hold him for a time ... but only for a time. Because there is still one more place where Luke talks about the cloths. It's when the disciples heard what seemed to be an idle tale (24:11). "But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened" (24:12).

The Christmas story doesn't make a lot of sense—especially the whole part about owning him—unless we remember *why* God became man. The Christ-child was born to die and to rise again. This is what it means when Isaiah prophesies, "For to *us* a child is born, to us a son is *given*" (Is. 9:6). This is what it means when the angel proclaims to the shepherds, "For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*" (2:11).

This child was born to you. To own him means to own everything he has done for you. If you own his birth, you own his death. And if you own his death, you also own his life. And this to you is light, and life, and salvation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.